

CENTER FOR ANCIENT MIDDLE EASTERN LANDSCAPES

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As the new director of the Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (CAMEL), I have been busy thinking about, planning for, and implementing programs and initiatives that can redefine the position of the center (founded in the late 1990s by the late Tony Wilkinson) for ISAC students and faculty, as well as the greater University of Chicago and Near Eastern studies communities. The 2022–23 programming centered on four areas: physical space and equipment, research and training, the database, and outreach. The help of research assistant Dominik Lucas, a PhD candidate in anthropology and supervisor of the CAMEL laboratory, was fundamental in the design and implementation of all the projects.

ISAC generously funded the renovation and remodeling of the computer lab. In this process, the space was redesigned to serve better as a publicly accessible research hub with modern workspace, large boards and monitors, visible signage, and shared supplies to encourage student usage (fig. 1). Computer security was also increased to serve a broader community. A reorganization of the equipment room is now underway to accommodate safe storage, assessment, and training.

One aspect of the new vision for CAMEL is to make it a research and training hub for students and scholars interested in studying ancient landscapes and geospatial research. ISAC supports a cohort of undergraduate and graduate students who assist with ongoing projects and receive training to take on new, more advanced responsibilities. These students will provide research support for other students, faculty, and investigators. While CAMEL gives priority to those affiliated with ISAC and the University of Chicago's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, anyone in and outside the university community can reach out to the center for support in geospatial data collection, remote sensing, digital cartography for



Figure 1. CAMEL research assistant Çağlayan Bal teaching an introductory workshop on open-source QGIS software in the newly remodeled computer lab.

presentations and publications, and/or general project design. CAMEL also began offering free geographic information systems (GIS) and mapping consultation hours in spring 2023.

With the help of Matthew Perley, ISAC's assistant director for finance and administration, CAMEL sought registration as a University of Chicago recharge center beginning in fall 2023 to make it possible to outsource mapping and geospatial data management projects to students vetted and supervised by CAMEL in exchange for a modest hourly fee. We anticipate that this initiative will result in increased publication for faculty, staff, and students, as well as funds for better student training and more resources for the community. If students are involved in the publication of outcomes, CAMEL will subsidize some of our patrons' research costs. For example, research assistant Christian Borgen, who started training in GIS in fall 2022, is now leading a research project funded by an ISAC faculty member.

Many students and faculty expressed interest in training workshops on GIS software, methods, and field techniques and equipment. CAMEL research assistant Yuwei Zhou planned and managed our first experiment with offering free workshops in spring 2023. Çağlayan Bal, a PhD student in Near Eastern art and archaeology, taught an introductory workshop on open-source QGIS software. The Forum for Digital Culture kindly cosponsored two other workshops: Photogrammetry and Total Station. We plan to provide two or three training workshops per year, and we would like to hear from our community about specific needs we can support through our programming.

Finally, we launched a multiquarter project, led by Dominik Lucas and fellow research assistant Murphy (Ruoyang) Tu, for database search improvement. CAMEL possesses an extensive collection of paper maps and negatives of historical satellite imagery, which were applied to landscape research, for the first time, at the CAMEL lab. During the tenure of former CAMEL lab director Scott Branting (2004–14), many of these documents were digitized and prepared for use in GIS software. Under former director Emily Hammer (2014–17), this digitized collection was moved to ISAC's searchable integrated database. Although these changes reduced the amount of time the CAMEL team spends on data requests, the difficulty of spatial searches in the database interface limits public use of this valuable archive. One of our priorities was to make the CAMEL imagery database more easily accessible by providing a publicly available map-search interface. Through a connection made by the director of the Regenstein Library's Center for Digital Scholarship, Cecilia Smith, we partnered with the Big Ten Academic Alliance Geoportal project (<https://geo.btaa.org/>) to enable searches of our collection through this map-based interface, used by several libraries and archives across the country, with a soft launch planned for winter 2023. Foy Scaif, head of ISAC's Research Archives and its Integrated Database Project, was a crucial partner. We would not have dared to embark on this journey without his technological expertise and institutional knowledge.

The value of the CAMEL lab lies in the support it offers to the community. Our team is eager to connect, as evidenced by the two meet-and-greet events we held for faculty, staff, and students. We plan to repeat such events every year. In addition, we created a mailing list and began to reach out to our subscribers regularly with news about our offerings and events. If you would like to be added to our list, please give us your contact information by emailing us at camel@uchicago.edu.

The help of individuals who generously shared their time, thoughts, and expertise with the CAMEL team was instrumental in successfully implementing the initiatives outlined above. Special thanks go to ISAC faculty and staff members Theo van den Hout, Brendan Bulger, Foy Scaif, Vick Cruz, Anthony Lauricella, Andrew Wright, Logan Conley, Marianna Capeles, Mariana Perlinac, Matt Perley, James Osborne, Hervé Reculeau, and Yorke Rowan. I would also like to thank the 2022–23 cohort of CAMEL research assistants: Dominik Lucas, Harrison Morin, Murphy (Ruoyang) Tu, Çağlayan Bal, Christian Borgen, and Yuwei Zhou, who put incredible amounts of mental and physical labor into a myriad of complicated and tedious tasks related to the remodeling and reprogramming of CAMEL's computer lab, equipment room, and document archives. Our connections make us grow stronger. Please write to me at mehrnoush@uchicago.edu if you are interested in collaborating with us or in funding one of our many projects.